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ABSTRACT

The current progress of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is examined, and its background is summarized. Federally financed since the late 1960's, the NAEP is a survey of U.S. students' achievment in various subject areas. As an indicator of change in elementary and secondary educational achievement, it has received attention with regard to measuring progress toward the National Education Goals. Until recently, assessments have been conducted for the nation as a whole and by region, but not on a state or local basis. However, a voluntary state demonstration project was authorized for 1990 and 1992 assessments to determine whether valid and reliable data could be obtained at the state level; preliminary information should be available by the summer of 1991. The NAEP was given its statutory basis in 1978, was last amended in 1988, and is presently authorized through 1993. It is currently conducted by the Educational Testing Service under contract with the National Center for Education Statistics. (SLD)

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National Assessment of Educational Progress: Background and Status

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SUMMARY

This report examines the current status of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and summarizes its background. Federally financed since the late 1960s, the NAEP is a survey of U.S. students' achievement in various subject areas. It serves as an indicator of change in elementary and secondary educational achievement over the past two decades. As such, it has received additional attention with regard to measuring progress toward the National Education Goals. The NAEP is authorized through FY 1993; the FY 1991 appropriation is $19.2 million. Until recently, assessments have been conducted for the Nation as a whole and by region, but not on a State basis or by school district, school, or pupil. However, a voluntary State demonstration project was authorized for the 1990 and 1992 assessments (grade 8 mathematics in 1990, grades 4 and 8 mathematics and grade 4 reading in 1992) to determine whether valid and reliable data could be obtained at the State level; preliminary information from this trial should be available by the summer of 1991. First supported under Federal discretionary authority, the NAEP was given a specific statutory basis in 1978, and was last amended in 1988. The NAEP is currently conducted by the Educational Testing Service, under contract with the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) within the U.S. Department of Education (ED).

SELECTED CURRENT ISSUES

Interest in NAEP has recently increased for several reasons. First, the initial 1990 **State demonstration** project will begin to yield results in the summer of 1991, and the preparation for the 1992 State demonstration is now well underway.[1] More accurate indicators of State education systems have been

[1]In part because a lead time of several years is required, the Congress authorized two trial State assessments. Evaluations are to be completed within 18 months of each assessment, but the preparation for the 1992 demonstration will be nearly complete before the results of the 1990 assessment are known.

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needed to measure their performance. Valid State data from NAEP might provide this information, similar to what the NAEP currently provides at the national level. Some have recommended that the authority to conduct such comparisons be made permanent, and even be expanded to the local educational agency level, while others want to evaluate the current demonstration before authorizing additional State assessments. NAEP officials have sought the extension of NAEP authority for future State assessments; they claim that substantial planning must begin now in order to conduct any State assessment in 1994.

Second, NAEP is the only existing national achievement test and has thus seemed an attractive potential mechanism for measuring progress toward certain of the **national education goals**.[2] More specifically, the reference in the third goal--of demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter in grades 4, 8, and 12--seems clearly related to the NAEP testing structure (described below in *Content and Design* section). Further, under a 1988 provision, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) must identify "appropriate achievement goals" for each age and grade in each subject area to be tested; this requirement has received attention due to its potential relationship to the goals assessment process. Through this process of identifying achievement levels, NAEP reports would assess the adequacy of student performance.

An underlying theme in these issues is that increasing the stakes of the NAEP process--using NAEP scores as a basis for State achievement comparisons, and for measuring progress toward meeting the national education goals--raises concerns about the nature and development of this national test, and the role of the Federal Government in supporting it.

EARLY HISTORY

In 1963, U.S. Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel asked the Carnegie Corporation of New York to initiate a project to provide data on the **outputs** of U.S. elementary and secondary education. The Exploratory Committee on Assessing the Progress of Education (ECAPE), appointed by Carnegie, laid the groundwork for the first NAEP effort. The committee was funded by Carnegie and the Ford Foundation's Fund for the Advancement of Education. In July 1968, ECAPE turned the project over to the Committee on Assessing the Progress of Education (CAPE) for implementation. CAPE was funded by the U.S. Office of Education, Carnegie, and Ford. In July 1969, the functions of CAPE were assumed by the recently established Education Commission of the States. The first round of the assessment was conducted in calendar year 1969 and covered writing, science, and citizenship.

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[2]For a discussion of these goals and related issues, see U.S. Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service. *National Education Goals: Where Are We Now?* CRS Report for Congress No. 90-169 EPW, by James B. Stedman, et al. Washington, 1990.

As originally designed, NAEP focused on the performance of students at ages 9, 13, and 17, and adults. It was to report on performance for four geographic regions, four types of communities, and two socioeconomic levels; and conduct its assessment based on samples of students responding to only portions of the total test. Some of these features, such as regional reporting of results and student sampling, served, in part, to counter concerns raised by some groups that had suggested that a national assessment would lead to undesirable comparisons of the performance of different localities and States.

The NAEP was first funded in FY 1968 at $1 million, according to ED, under discretionary authority available at that time. Specific authority for NAEP was formally enacted in P.L. 95-561, the Education Amendments of 1978. The legislation made few changes to the objective, structure, or content of the ongoing NAEP project.

FUNDING AND AUTHORIZATION

For FY 1991, the NAEP appropriation is $19.2 million. The FY 1992 budget request is $28.1 million. The increase is to be used for the 1992 demonstration State assessment, as well as the regular national assessment. Under the 1992 State demonstration, data will be collected in about 45 States and territories from a sample of approximately 350,000 students. At the national level, approximately 140,000 additional students will be assessed.

The NAEP is authorized as one of several NCES activities under section 406(i) of the General Education Provisions Act, title IV of P.L. 90-247, as amended (GEPA). There are authorized to be appropriated such sums as may be necessary for the NCES for fiscal years 1990 through 1993 (section 406(f) of GEPA). A minimum funding level is specified for the NAEP of $9.5 million in FY 1989, and such sums as may be necessary for 1990 through 1993 (section 405(f) of GEPA). The NAEP was last amended by P.L. 100-297, the Augustus F. Hawkins-Robert T. Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988.

CONTENT AND DESIGN

The NAEP must assess reading and mathematics at least once every 2 years, writing and science at least once every 4 years, and "history/geography" and other subjects (civics, for example) at least once every 6 years. Data must be collected on students at ages 9, 13, and 17 and in grades 4, 8, and 12. The NAEP is responsible for reporting "reliable trends" in achievement data, and it must include information on special groups of students (for example, by race or ethnicity, or type of community). Sampling techniques are required in order to make NAEP data representative on a national and regional basis. For each subject area, goal statements must be developed through a "national consensus approach" that involves the participation of teachers, curriculum specialists, local school administrators, parents, and the general public. Presumably, these statements will guide the construction of questions in each subject area assessed.

A **voluntary State demonstration project** is authorized for the 1990 and 1992 assessments to determine whether valid, reliable, and representative data can be obtained at the State level. The 1990 State trial assessed mathematics in grade 8; the 1992 trial is limited to mathematics in grades 4 and 8, and reading in grade 4. State participation is voluntary; the results from any State may not be released until the State has reviewed them and given its permission for publication. For the 1990 trial, 40 States and territories participated; the number is expected to increase to 45 for the 1992 trial. Preliminary results from the 1990 State trial should be available by the summer of 1991. The trial demonstration must be evaluated by ED with regard to the feasibility and validity of individual State assessments and the technical problems encountered. A report on the evaluation must be made to the Congress and the participating States no later than 18 months after each trial assessment. At present, no additional State demonstrations are authorized.

Currently, NAEP uses a type of **matrix sampling** to reduce the testing burden on individual students.[3] Under this technique, the large number of questions for any given subject is divided so that each student answers only a portion of the total assessment. Each participant typically spends an hour or less. Different assessment forms are distributed to each sample of students, reducing the risk of copying answers from neighbors. Test items are also mixed so that no single portion of the test is consistently given last, reducing the risk of testing fatigue systematically influencing part of the test results. Test questions continue to be predominantly multiple choice, but an increasing proportion in recent years provide for open-ended responses.

ADMINISTRATION

The legislation specifies responsibilities for a number of different individuals or groups, including the NCES Commissioner of Education Statistics, the Assistant Secretary for Educational Research and Improvement, the Secretary of Education, and the NAGB. These duties are listed below. In general, the Commissioner has the responsibility for the overall administration of the NAEP program; the NAGB formulates NAEP policy; and the Secretary and Assistant Secretary have relatively lesser duties. Currently, the NAEP is conducted under contract with the **Educational Testing Service**; competitive awards are generally made every 5 years.

With regard to NAEP, the **Commissioner of Education Statistics** must:

- carry out the NAEP program, with the advice of NAGB, by grant, contract, or cooperative agreement;

- provide for an independent evaluation of the State demonstration assessment;

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[3]Mullis, Ina V.S. *The NAEP Guide: A Description of the Content and Methods of the 1990 and 1992 Assessments*. Princeton, Educational Testing Service, 1990. p. 37-39.

- ensure the confidentiality of all personally identifiable NAEP data and
- provide for continuing reviews of the NAEP.

The **NAGB** is required to:

- advise the Commissioner of Education Statistics;
- formulate policy guidelines;
- select the additional subject areas for assessment every 6 years;
- identify appropriate achievement goals for each age, grade, and subject area assessed;
- develop assessment objectives;
- develop test specifications;
- design assessment methodology;
- develop guidelines and standards for analysis, reports, and dissemination of results;
- develop standards and procedures for interstate, regional, and national comparisons;
- initiate actions needed to improve the form and use of the NAEP;
- have final authority over all cognitive assessment questions;
- ensure that all questions are free from racial, cultural, gender, or regional bias;
- use no more than 10 percent of the funds available for NAEP for administrative expenses, including staff, consultants, and contracts; and
- subject to the availability of funds, direct an assessment of adult literacy.

The **Assistant Secretary for Educational Research and Improvement** must serve as an ex officio, nonvoting member of NAGB.

The **Secretary of Education** must:

- appoint the members of NAGB to serve for rotating terms of 4 years each (appointments must be made from a list of nominees selected by NAGB);

- report to NAGB on the Department's implementation of NAGB decisions; and

- enter into an agreement with each State participating in the State demonstration to assure that the State will pay from nonfederal sources the nonfederal costs of the assessment, including school level administration and the cost of coordination within the State.

The **members of NAGB** must include:

- two governors, or former governors, not of the same political party;

- two State legislators, not of the same political party;

- two chief State school officers;

- one superintendent of a local educational agency;

- one member of a State board of education;

- one member of a local board of education;

- three classroom teachers representing the grade levels at which the NAEP is conducted;

- one representative of business or industry;

- two curriculum specialists;
- two testing and measurement experts;

- one nonpublic school administrator or policymaker;

- two school principals, one elementary and one secondary; and

- three additional members who are representatives of the general public, including parents.